

# Mystical Anthropology: Cross-Religious Perspectives

Interdisciplinary Reflections on the  
*Arnhem Mystical Sermons*  
and Sri Aurobindo

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# The Problem of the Self and the Divine in the Mystical Testimonies

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## 1. Introduction

Even if people in different religions worship different divine objects – in some religions people worship “one God” while in some others “many gods/goddesses” or “no god” at all – no faith is possible without *credo* (“I believe”). Regardless of whether they are conscious of it or not, the “self” forms an indispensable ground in all religions from which testimonies are verbalized. The tendency to understand the divine in tight relation with the self is especially obvious in the “mystical” testimonies, as we will see in the texts which we have at hand – the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* and the works of Sri Aurobindo.<sup>1</sup> Therefore I chose the problem of the self as the topic of this essay for carrying out the difficult task of dealing with different mystical testimonies from different religious contexts, because this problem can be used as a valid measure for evaluating mystical testimonies within a single scope despite the difference in particular faiths.

This essay is composed of three parts. In the first part I reconstruct the problem of the self and the divine from a third source, namely, the texts of the German mystic Meister Eckhart. I base the framework of our argument on him, because he seems to provide a quite fundamental standpoint with regard to this issue. In the second part, I pick up some relevant statements from the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, and, in comparison with Eckhart, examine how the anonymous author of this sermon collection understands this problem. In the third part, I do the same concerning Sri Aurobindo. And in the end, I will conclude this essay by summing up the things in common and differences among the three authors.

<sup>1</sup> In the following, I use the term “the divine” instead of “God,” taking the different faiths of the three authors into account. I use, however, “God” or “the Divine” with quotation marks when I quote from the texts or when I argue within the terminology of each author.

## 2. Meister Eckhart: Oneness of the Self

It is commonly accepted that the central theme in the thought of the German Dominican Meister Eckhart is the unity between the divine and the human soul. The well-known motifs in his vernacular sermons such as “the birth of God” (*geburt gotes*), “abandon(ment)” (*lâzene*) or “detachment” (*abegescheidenheit*) are indeed all intended to the realization of this unity. Yet, it might be noteworthy that there are some cases in his sermons where Eckhart speaks about the unity not between the divine and the human being in general, but between “God and me.”<sup>2</sup> It seems that this Dominican preacher tends to do this when his description about the unity gets to the core of his argument.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he firmly intended to portray the relation between the divine and the human being not simply as a general matter for any human being, but as a matter for none other than “I.”<sup>4</sup> Let us start our examination with the following quotation from the German Sermon 28.

I once thought – it was not long ago – that I am a man (daz ich ein mensche bin), that belongs to another man commonly as well as to me. That I see, hear, eat and drink, that does also another animal. However, that I am (daz ich bin); that belongs to no one else than to me alone; neither to any person, nor to any angel, nor to God, unless I am one with Him; it is one purity and one oneness.<sup>5</sup>

In this quotation Eckhart makes a distinction between the two propositions: “I am a man” and “I am.” What is the difference between them then?

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed the problem of the self in Eckhart before in the following article (Japanese). Satoshi Kikuchi, “Solipsism of Soul and God in the Thought of Eckhart,” *Bulletin of the Graduate Division of Literature of Waseda University* 49 (2004) 31-41. As to Eckhart, the following argument in this essay is partly based on this article.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Shizuteru Ueda, “‘Kami no ko no tanjou’ to ‘shinsei heno toppa’: doitsugo sekkyōshuu ni okeru Meister Eckhart no konponshisou,” *Doitsu shinpishugi kenkyū*, ed. Shizuteru Ueda (Tokyo: Soubunsha, 1982) 167.

<sup>4</sup> The core of Eckhart’s understanding of the self-problem is that the being of “I” can only be determined by the existential relationship with the other beings: “you” or “he” or “she.” In the following argument about Eckhart, I use, therefore, the term “I” (or “me”) instead of “the self,” despite the difficulty for reading, in fear of the generalization of “the self” to “you” or “he” or “she,” instead of “I.”

<sup>5</sup> Pr. 28; DW II, 63, 3-7; *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. & ed. Maurice O’C. Walshe, rev. Bernard McGinn (New York: Crossroad, 2009) 131. In the following, I refer to the critical edition of Eckhart’s works: *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Pr. = Predigt; DW = deutsche Werke), Hrg. im Auftrag der deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft v. J. Quint u.a. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936ff). For the quotation, I use the above mentioned English translation by Maurice O’C. Walshe, with some modification for the sake of coherency with the terms which I use in this essay.

The proposition "I am a man" refers to the attribute which identifies the person "Eckhart" along with other propositions such as "I am a Dominican," "I am a theologian," etc. As Eckhart says, "that belongs to another man as well as to me," those attributes can be owned by any other person or can be changed or lost according to situations.

The proposition "I am," however, refers to the being of "I" which has nothing to do with the person "Eckhart." The being of "I" is none of the attributes which identify the person, but it is the bare fact that "I" exist in the mode of "I" – "I" am neither "you" nor "him" nor "her," etc. Suppose "Eckhart" would become a stone, and he would not "see, hear, eat and drink" any more, then the identity of the person "Eckhart" would have to be changed, and perhaps no one would call this stone "Eckhart" any more. However, the person "Eckhart" does not need to be "I" in order to be "Eckhart." "I" happen to be "Eckhart" and not to be anyone else, but being "I" is not an indispensable condition for being "Eckhart." Even if "Eckhart" would not be "I" any more, the person "Eckhart" would still remain "Eckhart." Perhaps no one would notice that "Eckhart" is not "I" any more. "That I am" is no less an attribute of another person than that of the person "Eckhart," since "that I am" belongs "to me alone."<sup>6</sup>

Now we have to recall that, in the quotation above, Eckhart makes an exception. He says: "that I am; that belongs to no one else but to me alone; neither to any person, nor to any angel, nor to God, unless I am one with Him." What does this exception mean then: "unless I am one with God?" The being of "I" does not belong to all the other beings including "God," except when "I am one with God." Eckhart's logic is perhaps paradoxical: the being of "I" is so one and unique, to the extent that it does not even belong to the divine, that "I" can be one with the divine who alone is as one as "I" am.<sup>7</sup> In another paragraph of the German Sermon 28, Eckhart says: "'Ego,' namely the word 'I' is proper to no one else than to God alone in his oneness."<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, when "I" say "I" in the absolute sense of the word, this "I" can be one with the divine. In this way, the core of Eckhart's thought is to "break-through" (*durchbrechen*) the personality, which is identifiable through

<sup>6</sup> For the argument about the duplex mode of "I," I owe much to the Japanese philosopher Hitoshi Nagai. See especially his following book (Japanese): Hitoshi Nagai, *'Watashi' no sonzai no hiruinasu* (Tokyo: Keisoushobou, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> See also the following quotation from Eckhart's German Sermon 69: "By virtue of being like nothing, this power (a power in the soul) is like God. Just as God is like nothing, so too this power is like nothing" (Pr. 69; DW III, 171, 1-2; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 235).

<sup>8</sup> Pr. 28; DW II, 68, 4-5; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 132.

attributes and therefore changeable and replaceable, and realise the being of “I” which is one with the divine. In the German Sermon 52 he says:

When I flowed forth from God, all creatures declared: “God is.” And this cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge myself as a creature. But in my breaking-through (*durchbrechen*), where I stand free of my own will and of God’s will and of all his works and of God himself, then I am above all creatures, and I am neither God nor creature, but I am what I was and what I shall remain, now and eternally. [...] for in this breaking-through I receive (*empfahe*) that God and I are one.<sup>9</sup>

Eckhart describes here the state where “I” am so one and unique that “I” transcend the relation with all other beings – including “God” – and have nothing equal to “me” – Eckhart emphasizes also in this quotation that “I am neither God nor creature” – and precisely on account of this, “I” am one with the divine who is also so one and unique that he transcends the relation with all other beings and has nothing equal to himself.

Then, if “I” am one with the divine in such an extreme way, can “I” rightly call “myself” “God”? It should be noted that, even in a radical statement like this, Eckhart does not say: “I am God,” instead, he says: “I receive that God and I are one.” When “I” break-through the relation with all others – including “God” – and become one with the divine self, “I” realise that the oneness with the divine is given to “me.” “I” do not encounter the absolute otherness of the divine, unless “I” am one with the divine self.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Pr. 52; DW II, 504,5–505,5; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 424.

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that Eckhart is not speaking about the distinction between the creator and the creature. Rather, he speaks of the otherness between “God” with whom “I” am one, and the “Godhead” which is other even to “God” himself. See the following quotation from the German Sermon 22 where Eckhart says that the “Godhead” is unknown in “God himself:” “What is the final end? It is the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead, which is unknown and never has been known and never shall be known. There God remains in himself unknown and the light of the eternal Father has been shining there eternally, and the darkness does not comprehend the light” (Pr. 22; DW I, 389, 6–10; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 283). In parallel with his duplex understanding of the concept “I,” Eckhart sees duplicity also in “God,” namely, “God” who is seen from the perspective of created beings – Eckhart calls “God” in this dimension “the Creator,” “the utmost goodness,” etc. – and “God” who is seen from “God” himself – Eckhart calls “God” in this dimension “the ground of God,” “Godhead,” “Oneness,” “Father,” etc. Obviously, “God” who is one with “I” is the latter. In the following quotation from the German Sermon 52, Eckhart makes a clear distinction between “God” for the created beings and “God” for God himself: “While I yet stood in my first cause, I had no “God” and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was an empty being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth... But when I went out from my own free will and received my created being, then I had a “God.” For before there were creatures, God was not “God,” but he was what he was. But when creatures came into existence and received their created being, then God was not “God” in himself, but he was “God” in creatures” (Pr. 52; DW II, 492, 3–493, 2; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 421–422).

However, we could raise a question here. If “my” relation with the divine is so one and unique that “I” have nothing equal to “me,” how could “I” understand, from the standpoint of “I,” the relation between the divine and other human persons? As to this question, let us examine the following quotation from the German Sermon 46.

How does a human person come to be the only Son of the Father? Take note: The eternal Word did not take upon itself this person or that, but it took upon itself one free, indivisible human nature, bare and without image ... Therefore, in order to be one Son, you must be detached and depart from whatever makes for distinction in you. For the human person is an accident of nature: so, do away with whatever is an accident in you and take yourselves in the free, undivided human nature. But since this very nature wherein you take yourselves has become the Son of the eternal Father by the assumption of the eternal Word, thus in this way you, with Christ, become the Son of the eternal Father by reason of taking yourselves by that same nature which has there become God.<sup>11</sup>

In this quotation, oneness of “I” is replaced with the oneness of the human nature, and of the divine sonship. In parallel with this, the human person in general or “you” – note that in the original German “you” is put in the plural form *ir* – are, instead of “I,” laid as the subjects of these sentences, who are said to become “one Son of the Father.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, Eckhart applies the oneness of “I” widely to other people.

Nevertheless, the idea which is behind this statement is perhaps not that each human person, as well as “I,” has his or her own unique way of participating in the same human nature and the same divine sonship according to his or her particular personality. Eckhart does not mean either that all human persons are to be united together in one being beyond all multiplicity and distinctions. Rather, Eckhart means that each human person should transcend the personal uniqueness which is identifiable according to various attributes, and should become “the one son of God” who has nothing equal to him. Therefore, in the same German

<sup>11</sup> Pr. 46; DW 2, 379, 5-382, 3; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 255-256.

<sup>12</sup> In this essay, I do not go into the Christological argument. Yet it might be noteworthy that the problem of the sonship and that of human nature are key to grasping Eckhart’s thought from the doctrinal point of view. His radical application of the concept of “the only-begotten Son” (*filius unigenitus*) to other human persons especially was not only one of the important ideas of his thought but it also became one of the main issues at the Inquisition which he went through in his last years. In the end, this understanding was condemned by the papal bull *In agro dominico* in 1329. Concerning his understanding of the sonship and human nature, see Satoshi Kikuchi, “Christological Problems in the Understanding of the Sonship in Meister Eckhart,” *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 69 (2008) 365-381.



Sermon 46, Eckhart says “you” – again this is put in the plural form *ir* – have to be “one Son of the Father” instead of saying that all individual human persons should become “many sons.”

And so, if a human person is to know God – and therein consists his eternal bliss – he must be, with Christ, an only Son of the Father. So, if you would be blessed, you must be one Son: not many sons, but one Son. True, You remain clearly distinguished in your carnal birth, but in the eternal birth you must be one, for in God there is no more than the one natural spring.<sup>13</sup>

However, a question still remains. In the end, would it not be fundamentally meaningless to generalise the problem of the oneness of “I” to all human persons, because “I” can never know from “my” perspective whether or not other human persons are also in the same mode of “I” as “I” am. The more “I” become conscious of the oneness of “I,” the sheerer the unknowableness about another “I” becomes. Did Eckhart really succeed in filling the gap between these two different realities? I leave this question for another occasion, because for this essay it seems sufficient to point out the fundamental difference between “I” who can only be understood from the existential relationship with all the other beings and “the self” in general which can be applicable to all personal beings.

### 3. The *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*: Anthropology of the Self

As far as the problem of the relation between the self and the divine is concerned, a remarkable point in the sermon collection *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* is the frequent appearance of the motif of union with the divine through self-annihilation. This motif plays a central role especially in Sermon 2, from which I pick up the following two examples.

And when our mind (geest) wholly loses its selfness (selvesheit) in this darkness, then a supernatural, incomprehensible light comes into it, whose immeasurableness and clarity no reason can understand nor heart conceive. [...].<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Pr. 46; DW 2, 378, 7-379, 2; Walshe, *Complete Mystical Works*, 255.

<sup>14</sup> *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, sermon 2, fol. 3va, translation in “Mystical Sermons,” transl. Kees Schepers, in *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Rob Faesen, and Helen Rolfsen, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008) 356: *Ende ist sake dat onsen geest in deser duysternisse sijn selvesheit te gronde verliest, soe coemt in hem daer nae een avernatuerlick, onbegrijpelijk licht, welck ongemetenheit ende claerheit geen verstant can begripen noch hert uutdencken [...].*

See, this failing (ontbrekinge) and annihilation (nyetwerdinge) of all selfness (selvesheit) are the signs that really need to happen in the sun of our minds (geestes) and in the moon of our soul if God is truly to be born spiritually in us and we in Him. [...].<sup>15</sup>

In a symbolical way, “the sun,” “the moon,” “the stars” and “light and darkness” represent human faculties in this sermon – the sun: the mind; the moon: the soul; the stars: humanity – and those symbols are interwoven with the process of the annihilation of those human faculties. Furthermore, this anonymous author clearly means those human faculties by the word “selfness.”

Why, then, does the author call the human faculties “selfness?” A possible interpretation for this is that the human senses are regarded as the attributes which compose the self as personality. Yet, according to the author, the attributes of the self belong fundamentally to “God,” because they are all created by him; nevertheless, we wrongly believe that they belong to the self. Hence, the term “selfness” in this sermon might contain the meaning of our ego-centric attitude considering those created faculties as our own. Therefore, the aim of self-annihilation is to realise that everything in us are created by the creator and we possess nothing from ourselves. By this realization, “God is truly to be born spiritually in us and we in Him.”<sup>16</sup> Namely, we encounter the creator in

<sup>15</sup> *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, sermon 2, fol. 4ra, transl. *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, 357: *Siet, dese ontbrekinge ende nyetwerdinge alre selvesheit sijn die teikenen die waerlick geschien moeten inder sonnen ons geestes ende inder manen onser zielen, sal god geestelick in ons ende wij in hem waerlick verbaren werden [...].*

<sup>16</sup> If we see the historical link between Eckhart and late medieval Catholic mysticism, we should also note the allegorical use of the birth motifs in the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, namely, “the birth of the Son of God in the human soul” or “human person’s becoming the sons (children) of God” (examples are found in Sermons 1; 2; 9; 10). These motifs originate from the statements in John’s Gospel and in the Letters of St. Paul related to God’s sonship. In the patristic period, these motifs were combined with ecclesiology, and used as a typical expression for believers’ participation in the sonship of Christ, the Only-begotten Son. In the Middle Ages, some contemplative authors changed the accent of these motifs according to their interest in a direct relation with God. They insisted that the human person as a whole (or the highest part of the soul – sometimes expressed as “a spark” or “the ground” of the soul – which is beyond any human faculty) is to be transformed into the son of God equal to Christ. And therefore, in some radical cases like in Eckhart, these motifs were the cause of suspicion by the Church authorities. In the allegorical translation of these motifs in the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, however, the subject that becomes “children of God” is said to be individual human faculties – memory, reason, will, etc. – or individual human virtues – humility, reverence, etc. Therefore, neither ecclesiology nor the theme of whole-personal rebirth into God’s sonship comes to the foreground, but the self-analysis of human faculties is more important. As an example, I quote the following passages from Sermon 10, fol. 19rb: “But those who were His, who belong to Him – that is, memory, reason and will – did not receive Him, for they turned outward and got lost in disparate, created

us, beyond ourselves. We have to surrender ourselves completely to the divine, to the extent that we feel that even the desire for the divine is not produced by ourselves but given by the divine.

If, then, the bodily senses thus start to fail in their function to the extent that the subject does not desire, taste nor feel God, then because of this there will arise in this person fear and aridity, and such anxiety and depression of his nature, that it will seem to him and he will feel as if the earth of his heart will perish. But in case that this person endures this collapse in his lowest, middle and highest part equably, patiently, meekly and humbly and perseveres in it till the end, then unquestionably there will arise in him a new, shining earth [...] then there is the opportunity for God the heavenly Father to give birth through the love of his spirit to his eternal Son in human nature into our flesh and humanity, and to transform us into him.<sup>17</sup>

As far as the formal scheme goes, this process of uniting with the divine through self-annihilation looks similar to what Eckhart admonished, that is, “breaking-through” from “I” as a personality into the being of “I” who is one with “God.” Nevertheless, there is perhaps a fundamental difference between the concern of Eckhart and that of this sermon. Eckhart’s concern was directed to the question of what it really means “to be I;” in other words, who the self is. And he understood the self in the transcendental relation with all other beings including not only the created beings but also the creator (we should remember that Eckhart said: “that I am, that belongs to no one else than to me alone; neither to any person, nor to any angel, nor to God”). For Eckhart, “breaking-through” does not mean, at least principally, to annihilate the

things. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the ability to become children of God (cf. John 1, 12).” Cf.: *Mer die sijn, die hem daer toe hoeren, dats die memoerie, verstant ende den wil, en ontfiengen hem nyet, want sy keerden hem uut ende verduwelden in verstroyde, geschapen dingen. Mer hoe voel datter hem ontfiengen, den gaf hi macht kijnderen gods toe werden.* See also fol. 19va: “Thus, every faculty of the soul has the ability to become a child of the highest God, in as much as they experience this goodness – however small it may be that they think, know, love or desire – in Jesus Christ.” Cf.: *Aldus heeft elcke cracht der zielen macht een kint des hoechsten gods te werden, soe veer si dat guet – hoe cleyne dattet oeck is dat si gedencken, bekennen, mynnen of begeren connen – in Christo Jhesu beleven.*

<sup>17</sup> *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, Sermon 2, fol. 4va-5ra, transl. *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, 357-358: *Wanneer dan die synnen ons lichaems aldus in hoere werkinge begynnen te gebreken, soe dat hem gods nyet en lust noch en smaect of en gevoelt, hier van sal inden mensche sulken anxt ende dorricheit coemen ende sulke benaetheit ende dwanck der naturen, dattet schijnen sal ende hem te moede wesen sal als of die eerde sijns herten sal moeten vergaen. Ende ist dat sake dat die mensche desen onderganck nae sijn hoechste, myddelste ende nederste deel teffens gelick, lijdsamlick, gelatelick ende oetmoedelick uutlijdet, soe wort daer nae sekerlick in hem een nije, claeer eerde [...] Dan heeft god die hemelsche vader bequamheit sijnen ewigen soen in menschelicker naturen doer liefte sijns geestes in onsen vleys ende mensheit te gebaren ende ons in hem te averformen.*

ego-centric attitude in order to realise the origin of our created existence, but to reflect thoroughly on where “I” am standing. In the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, however, the concern seems to be about the sheer ontological distinction between the divine as the creator and the self as a created being (rather than the existential otherness between “God and me”). While admonishing self-annihilation, the author is not questioning “who” is to be annihilated, but “what” is to be annihilated. For this author, self-annihilation means to realise the origin of our created existence and base the religious life on a correct understanding of the relation between the divine and us.

Roughly summarizing, the problem of the self in the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* is treated as a core anthropological issue in a specific religious worldview. This could explain the fact that this sermon collection was seemingly meant for common use by a specific group of people who were expected to follow the formal scheme of self-annihilation, which would lead them to union with the divine. This is also evident in the liturgical character of these sermons. Every sermon was given on a specific day in the Church calendar, and their subject lines were selected according to the biblical event of each day.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the experience of union with the divine as such was combined with the practice of the sacraments.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Sri Aurobindo: Cosmology of the Self

In the text of Sri Aurobindo, the problem of the self appears as evidently as in Eckhart and in the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*. One of the most outstanding features of Aurobindo’s description regarding the self is the persistent mentioning of the duplex dimension of the human soul. In the following quotation, Aurobindo makes a distinction between the “superficial” mind on the surface of our soul and the “subliminal” or “true” mind “behind” the first one.

[...] there is a double soul or psychic term in us, as every other cosmic principle in us is also double. For we have two minds, one the surface mind of our expressed evolutionary ego, the superficial mentality created by us in our emergence out of Matter, another a subliminal mind which is not hampered by our actual mental life and its strict limitations, something large, powerful and luminous, the true

<sup>18</sup> An example can be found in sermon 8 where the subject “Joseph and Mary on the journey to Bethlehem” on Christmas day coincides with the motif of the nativity of “the Son of God” in the most humble human soul. See transl. *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, 359–361.

<sup>19</sup> See the example in sermon 1, where the author mentions that the union happens every time we receive the sacrament. See transl. *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, 354–355.

mental being behind that superficial form of mental personality which we mistake for ourselves. So also we have two lives, one outer, involved in the physical body, bound by its past evolution in Matter, which lives and was born and will die, the other a subliminal force of life which is not cabined between the narrow boundaries of our physical birth and death, but is our true vital being behind the form of living which we ignorantly take for our real existence.<sup>20</sup>

Aurobindo points out here our fundamental misunderstanding in taking the “superficial” mind for “ourselves.” Then what is our true self? Let us see the following statement in which he calls the divine (“pure *Atman*”) “self” (“pure self,” “divine self”).

It is necessary to understand clearly the difference between the evolving soul (psychic being) and the pure *Atman*, self or spirit. The pure self is unborn, does not pass through death or birth, is independent of birth or body, mind or life or this manifested Nature. It is not bound by these things, not limited, not affected, even though it assumes and supports them. The soul, on the contrary, is something that comes down into birth and passes through death – although it does not itself die, for it is immortal – from one state to another, from the earth plane to other planes and back again to the earth-existence. It goes on with this progression from life to life through an evolution which leads it up to the human state and evolves through it all a being of itself which we call the psychic being that supports the evolution and develops a physical, a vital, a mental human consciousness as its instruments of world-experience and of a disguised, imperfect, but growing self-expression. All this it does from behind a veil showing something of its divine self only in so far as the imperfection of the instrumental being will allow it. But a time comes when it is able to prepare to come out from behind the veil, to take command and turn all the instrumental nature towards a divine fulfilment. This is the beginning of the true spiritual life. The soul is able now to make itself ready for a higher evolution of manifested consciousness than the mental human – it can pass from the mental to the spiritual and through degrees of the spiritual to the supramental state.<sup>21</sup>

It is noteworthy that even if Aurobindo regards the “divine self” (*Atman*) as our “true self,” he is not saying that this divine self is the divine as such in the absolute sense. The divine self (*Atman* = *Jivatman*) can even come into “identity with the Divine,” but still this divine self “knows itself as

<sup>20</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, I, SABCL, vol. 18 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970) 220.

<sup>21</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, I, SABCL, vol. 22 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970) 438–439.

one centre of the multiple Divine," not as the only centre coinciding with the supreme divinity, as is said in the following quotation.

The natural attitude of the psychic being is to feel itself as the Child, the Son of God, the Bhakta; it is a portion of the Divine, one in essence, but in the dynamics of the manifestation there is always even in identity a difference. The Jivatman, on the contrary, lives in the essence and can merge itself in identity with the Divine; but it too, the moment it presides over the dynamics of the manifestation, knows itself as one centre of the multiple Divine, not as the Parameshwara (= the supreme Lord). It is important to remember the distinction; for, otherwise, if there is the least vital egoism, one may begin to think of oneself as an Avatar or lose balance like Hridaya with Ramakrishna.<sup>22</sup>

Although I am ignorant about what precisely *Parameshwara* means in the Hindu terminology, there seems to be a supra-category of the self (it is called "Self" with a capital letter) which even transcends *Atman*, as is mentioned in another place: "the self of Atman being free and superior to birth and death, the experience of the *Jivatman* and its unity with supreme or universal Self. [...]"<sup>23</sup>

The soul's dynamic process of approaching the "divine self" reminds us again of Eckhart's "breaking-through" into the being of "I" that is one with the "ego" of "God." Aurobindo also calls the divine the "pure self" in contrast with the superficial mind which is misunderstood as "ourselves." Moreover, the otherness of the divine seems to be grasped in a paradoxical way by Aurobindo as well as by Eckhart. Eckhart understood that the absolute otherness of the divine is revealed to "me" when "I" am one with the "ego" of "God." The self is, therefore, the place where the oneness with the divine takes place, and at the same time, the self is also the place where the otherness of the divine is revealed. Aurobindo, too, understands that when the soul, who normally considers the superficial mind wrongly as the self, becomes aware of "the true self" (*Atman*) and of its "identity with the Divine," the soul also realizes itself as "one centre of the multiple Divine," being united with the "universal Self."

However, we also have to take note of a difference in standpoint between Eckhart and Aurobindo. The former grounded his standpoint consciously on the being of "I," which is other than all other beings. This sheer otherness between "I" and all other beings gave him the ground for the unity between the divine and "I." As a consequence, however, this particular

<sup>22</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, I, 265-266.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

positioning seemed to bring forth an unbridgeable gap between the statement about the unity of the divine and “I,” and the statement about the unity of the divine and all human persons in general. In contrast with Eckhart, Aurobindo’s standpoint is not evidently seen, yet at least it is not grounded on “the supreme Self,” but on one of the many selves who are all in the cosmic movement from the untrue self toward the true divine self. As a consequence, the otherness between “I” and other selves is not questioned, so that the aforementioned gap does not come up in his thought.

In this regard, Aurobindo’s standpoint overlaps with that of the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* whose concern was also about the self in general. Yet, there is still a difference between the two authors. Even though Aurobindo speaks about many selves, he emphasizes the uniqueness of individual self as a person and his or her own way of approaching the divine. Therefore, he seems to admit more flexibility in the practice of *Yoga* as a way of approaching the divine than the anonymous author of the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* who combines the scheme of self-annihilation with the common life of believers in the liturgical context.<sup>24</sup> The following statement is noteworthy.

There are a thousand ways of approaching and realizing the Divine and each way has its own experiences which have their own truth and stand really on a basis one in essence but complex in aspects, common to all but not expressed in the same way by all. There is not much use in discussing these variations; the important thing is to follow one’s own way well and thoroughly.<sup>25</sup>

According to Aurobindo, the relation with the divine is unique for every individual self; not simply common for all, but unique for each; not simply one, but unique among “multiple Divine.” In his cosmologic view, each individual self, while moving from the untrue self toward the true self, composes the whole universe like a *monad* which is the simplest undivided substance. There are indeed uncountable individual selves, yet each one of them reflects in itself in a unique way the whole universe, since the whole universe as such is the “supreme or universal Self.”

## 5. Conclusion

I conclude this essay by summing up the similarity and difference among the three authors.

<sup>24</sup> See the examples in Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, II&III, SABCL, vol. 23 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970) 564-565; Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, IV, SABCL, vol. 24 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970) 1109-1110.

<sup>25</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, I, 114.

The similarity can be found in the content of their thought, namely, what they are speaking about; in other words, the understanding of the objectified self. The three of them seem to agree that the human soul should approach toward the divine by “breaking-through” or “annihilating” the self, or by becoming aware of the “misunderstanding” about the self. Maybe this scheme can be seen commonly in different religions as far as they provide any method of getting out of the earthly reality and coming into the divine reality.

The difference becomes evident, however, when we pay attention to where they ground their own self when they speak about the self. In Eckhart, the being of “I” was precisely his standpoint itself, grasped in its existential otherness from all the other beings. “I” was, therefore, situated not inside but outside of the world which he sees, and it was precisely this proper positioning that gave him the ground of the unity with the divine. In the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, the self was rather the subject of the religious anthropology of this text, and the self as the standpoint of the anonymous author him or herself was seemingly not questioned. In Aurobindo, the self was seen as a *monad* which composes, together with all other selves, the whole universe which is the “supreme or universal Self.” And Aurobindo’s own self seemed to be, as one of all the selves, situated within his dynamic cosmology.

This difference may not determine the quality of their thought, especially in the macro context of inter-religious dialogue today. Yet it may reveal, though inconspicuously, the distance between the surface where their thought emerges on the texts and the ground where their thought is verbalized, regardless of the difference in particular faiths. Where there is no distance between both levels, there we may find the living word, *verbum in principio*.